

How the Son of Pendragon made Knighthood

AT the sunset of an autumnal day the young son of the great King Pendragon came over the brow of a hill that stepped forward from a dark company of mountains and leaned over the vast shoreless sea which fills the west and drowns the north.

All day he had been wandering alone, his mind heavy with wonder over many things. He had heard strange tales of late, tales about his heroic father and the royal clan, and how they were not as other men, but half divine. They were not gods, he knew, for they could be slain in battle or could die with the crowding upon them of many years: but they were more terrible in battle than were the greatest of men, and they had vision and knowledge beyond the vision and knowledge of the druids, and were lordly beyond all men in mien and the beauty of courtesy, and lived beyond the common span of years, and had secret communion with the noble and invisible company. He had heard, too, of his destiny: that he, too, was to be a great king, as much greater than Pendragon than Pendragon was above all the kings of the world. What was "destiny," he wondered. Was it the fulfilment of days merely, or was it something more strange than that, more deep than he could see, so deep that even the druids and bards who used the word did not see far into the shadow of the lordly but ominous word.

Then, again, he turned over and over in his mind all the names he could think of that he might choose for his own: for the time was come for him to put away the name of his childhood and to take on that by which he should be known among men. Neither the King nor any other had striven to influence him in this choice, for a seer had declared

at the boy's birth that his name and his destiny would be revealed to the young prince in a dream, and so all were patient, for they knew that what the gods wanted to reveal they would reveal in their own way and at their own hour.

The boy was called by an ancient name of his people signifying snowbird. But now he knew the time was at hand when a life-name would have to be given or taken.

'Snowbird' came over the brow of the hill, and out of the way of the mountain-wind, and, being tired, lay down among the heather and stared across the vast grey wilderness of the sea. The sun set, and the invisible throwers of the nets trailed darkness across the waves and up the wild shores and over the faces of the cliffs. Stars climbed out of shadowy abysses, and the great chariots of the constellations rode from the west to the east and from the north to the south.

'Snowbird's' eyes closed, but when he opened them again to see if a star quivering on the verge of the horizon had in that brief moment sprung like a deer above the drowning wave, or had sunk like a white seabird passing out of sight, he saw a great and kingly figure standing beside him. So great in stature, so splendid in kingly beauty was the mysterious one who had so silently joined him, that 'Snowbird' thought he must be one of the gods.

"Do you not know me, my son?" said the kingly stranger.

'Snowbird' looked at him in awe and wonder but unrecognizingly.

"Do you not know me, my son?" he heard again. . . .
"for I am your father Pendragon."

"Then I see you at last, O my father, as you are in the truth, and not like a man as other men are?"

"Not so, my son. You see me thus because your boy's eyes can see no further. Hitherto you have never

seen me as now you see me, but only as a man as other men are, though more great than they and a king. But my home is yonder, and there I go before long, and that is why I have come to you as a vision in a dream . . . " and, as he spoke, he pointed to the great constellation of the *Arth*, or Bear, which nightly prowls through the vast abysses of the polar sky.

When the boy turned his gaze from the great constellation which hung in the dark wilderness overhead he saw that he was alone again. While he yet wondered in great awe at what he had seen and heard, he felt himself rise like a mist and become like a cloud, and, as a cloud, fare beyond the brows of the hills, and ascend the invisible stairways of the sky.

When for minutes that were as hours he had moved thus mysteriously into the pathless and unvisited realms of the air, he saw that he had left the highest clouds like dust on a valley-road after one has climbed to the summit of a mountain: nor could he see the earth save as a blind and obscure thing that moved between the twilights of night and dawn.

It seemed to him thereafter that a swoon came over him, and that after an immeasurable time he passed beyond the pale fires of unfamiliar stars. At last, suddenly, he saw that he stood on the verge of *Arth*, or *Arth Uthyr*, the Great Bear.

There he saw, with the vision of immortal not of mortal eyes, a company of most noble and majestic figures seated at what he thought a circular abyss, but which had the semblance of a vast table. Each of these seven great knights or lordly kings had a star upon his forehead, and these were the stars of the mighty constellation of the Bear which the boy had seen night after night from his home among the mountains by the sea.

It was with a surging throb at his heart that he recognized in the King of all these kings no other than himself.

While he looked, in amazement so great that he could hear the pulse of his heart, as in the silence of a wood one hears the tapping of a woodpecker, he saw this mighty phantom-self rise till he stood towering over all there, and heard a voice as though an ocean rose and fell through the eternal silences.

"Comrades in God," it said, "the time is come when that which is great shall become small, so that the unredeemed infinitude of what is little shall grow in greatness. And I who am King, and greatest of this divine company who worship at the Gates of the Pole, whence is the eternal stream of life, shall lead you."

And when the voice was ended, the mighty figure faded into the blue darkness, and only a great star shone where the uplifted dragon-helm had brushed the roof of heaven. One by one the white lords of the sky followed in his mysterious way, till once more were to be seen only the stars of the Bear.

The boy-king dreamed that he fell as a falling meteor, and then that he floated over land and sea as a cloud, and then that he sank as mist upon the hills of his own land.

A noise of wind stirred in his ears, and he felt the chill dew creep over his hands like the stealthy cold lip of the tide.

He rose stumblingly, and stood staring around him. He was on the same spot, under the brow of the hill that looked over the dim, shoreless seas, now obscure with the dusk. He glanced upward and saw the stars of the Great Bear in their slow majestic march round the Pole. Then he remembered.

He went slowly down the hillside, his mind heavy

with thought. When he was come to the place of the King, his father, lo, Pendragon and all his fierce chivalry came out to meet him, for the arch-druid had foretold that the great King to be had received his mystic initiation among the holy silence of the hills.

"I am no more Snowbird, the child," the boy said, looking at them fearlessly, and as though already King. "Henceforth I am Arth-Uthyr,* for my place is in the Great Bear which we see yonder in the north."

So all there acclaimed him as Arthur, the wondrous one of the stars, the Great Bear.

"I am old," said Pendragon, "and soon you shall be King, Arthur my son. So ask now a great boon of me, and it shall be granted to you."

Then Arthur remembered his dream.

"Father and King," he said, "when I am King after you I shall make a new order of knights, who shall be strong and pure as the immortal ones, and be tender as women, and simple as little children. But first I ask of you seven flawless virgin knights to be of my chosen company. To-morrow let the wood-wrights make for me a round dais, or table, such as that where we eat our roasted meats and drink from the ale-horns, but round and of a size whereat I and my chosen knights may sit at ease."

The King listened, and all there.

"So be it," said the King.

Then Arthur chose the seven flawless virgin knights, and called them to him.

"Ye are now Children of the Great Bear," he said, "and comrades and liegemen to me, Arthur, who shall be King of the West. And ye shall be known as the Knights

* Pronounced *Arth-Uir* or *Arth-Ur*. In ancient British *Arth* means Bear, and *Uthyr* great, wondrous.

of the Round Table. But no man shall make a mock of that name and live: and in the end that name shall be so great in the mouths and minds of men that they shall consider no glory of the world to be so great as to be the youngest and frailest of that knighthood."

And that is how Arthur, the son of Pendragon, who three years later became King of the West, read the Rune of the Stars that are called the Great Bear, and took their name upon him, and from the strongest and purest and noblest of the land made Knighthood, such as the world had not seen, such as the world since has not known.

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